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AUTHOR Roth, Lane
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ABSTRACT

While analyzing humor is difficult, Henri Bergson's concept of comedy (a person acting like a machine) outlined in the classic essay, "Le Rire," in 1900, is probably too narrow a definition. Science fiction film, a genre which has evolved since the publication of Bergson's essay, has also speculated about man and society, often to comment on, and to ameliorate, the human condition. The archetypal antinomy of artifact vs. nature, for Bergson the locus of comedy, is for most science fiction the focus of "angst." Nevertheless, the characters C-3PO and R2-D2 in George Lucas' "Star Wars" demonstrate Bergsonian comic principles primarily through reversal--a machine acting like a person--and sometimes through double reversal--a machine acting like a person acting like a machine. (RS)

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Bergsonian Comedy and the Human Machines in "Star Wars"

by Lane Roth

Henri Bergson's classic essay *Le Rire* ("Laughter), published in 1900, defined the parameters of comedy for modern sensibilities by emphasizing the relationship of man to machine. Bergson located humor in "rigidity, automatism," and "mechanical inelasticity," all which contract *elan vital* or natural spontaneity. For Bergson, laughter has "the utilitarian aim or general improvement," and the essence of comedy is "any substitution whatsoever of the artificial for the natural."

Science fiction film, a genre which has evolved since the publication of Bergson's essay, has speculated about man and society, often to comment on, and to ameliorate, as in the Bergsonian concept of laughter, the human condition. The essence of most science fiction has also been the "substitution...of the artificial for the natural." But this archetypal antinomy of artifact versus nature, for Bergson the locus of comedy, is for most science fiction the locus of *Angst*. Science fiction films -- from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926) to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) to *Saturn 3* (1979) -- have traditionally projected pessimistic and paranoid portrayals of man's relationship with his machines.

George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977) ruptures that tradition of technological terrors with its loveable comedy team, the droids R2-D2 and C-3PO. The unprecedented popularity of this film, measured in record-breaking box-office grosses as well as the attendant merchandising success focusing on the droid duet, suggests the relevance of the comic robots. They represent a reversal, and often a double reversal, of the

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Bergsonian concept of comedy as "something mechanical encrusted on the living." Bergson asserts that "we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing." The mechanical R2-D2 and C-3PO make us laugh because they give us the impression of being humans, humans who at times behave mechanically. These reversals are found in the droids' treatment by other characters, in the dynamics of their own interaction, and in the individual personality of C-3PO.

Treatment of the Droids by Others

"Good against Remotes is one thing, Good against the living -- that's something else," smuggler Han Solo cynically asserts, enunciating the antinomy of mechanical versus living. This dialectic is epitomized at the Mos Eisely cantina, which the droids are rudely prohibited from patronizing. We are first introduced to this locale as a "wretched hive of scum and villainy," through Obe-Wan Kenobi's *caveat* to hero Luke Skywalker. We then see the interior of this infamous spot through contiguous shots which display the exotic and often hideous countenance of the clientele. Yet when the droids attempt to enter with Luke, the barkeep yells, "Hey, we don't serve their kind, here." The lines are clearly drawn: the repulsive and the criminal are tolerated, so long as they are life forms; discrimination is voiced only against machines.

The barkeep is an unsympathetic, gruff character. The venerable Obi-Wan Kenobi treats the droids more kindly. When he hires Han Solo and his furry First Mate Chewbacca to pilot their escape from the planet Tatooine to the planet Alderaan, Solo inquires about the nature of his cargo. Obi-Wan Kenobi answers, "Only passengers. Myself, the boy, two droids, and no questions asked." Obi-Wan Kenobi's wording confers on the droids a status associated more with people than with mechanical objects. The hoary Jedi Knight, who initiates young Luke into the secrets of the

universe, initially treats R2-D2, whom he observes hiding from the marauding Sand People, as a child: "Hello, there. Come here, my little friend. Don't be afraid." When the droids become passengers, they continue to be treated as children. They share the back seat of the landspeeder, while Luke and Obi-Wan Kenobi ride up front, and they are never seen on the bridge of the *Millenium Falcon*, where decisions are made.

This contradictory treatment of the droids by other characters in the film is not inherently humorous, but works to support, however subtly, the *sine qua non* for Bergsonian comedy: "The more exactly these two images, that of a person and that of a machine, fit into each other, the more striking is the comic effect." This "single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement" that Bergson finds amusing, is further implied by the term "droid," which sounds like an abbreviation of "android," a type of robot constructed of synthetic flesh. This verbal connotation is visually contradicted by the emphatically metallic appearance of the two creatures. R2-D2, who resembles an ambulatory, stubby vibrator, is predominantly chrome and white, with blue highlights, while the more anthropomorphic C-3PO is gleaming bronze overall.

The Droids' Dyadic Dynamics

Bergsonian humor becomes manifest in the interaction of the droids. They are the first individuals that we see, as well as hear, receding into the narrative background only after the other heroes have been introduced. Because the machines are initially the only characters on whom we can focus, we are manipulated into identifying with them, accepting them as human.

Even after they no longer dominate screen space/time, they are spotlighted in cutaway scenes which allow for bits of comic "business." The machines appear in

these instances to be very human, reminiscent of other comedy teams, particularly Abbott and Costello. Like Abbott, C-3PO is taller and thinner than his partner, on whom he vents verbal and physical abuse. Like Costello, the shorter and fatter R2-D2 receives the abuse with (electronic) whistles, whimpers and raspberries, but is more adventurous, spirited, and sometimes gets the last laugh. R2-D2 also takes the only pratfall in the film when he is ambushed by the cloaked, Munchkin-like Jawas' stun ray. With their constant squabbling, the relationship of C-3PO and R2-D2 also suggests siblings, with the taller C-3PO the domineering, older brother. This image is congruent with their treatment as children by Obi-Wan Kenobi.

C-3PO asserts his dominance over R2-D2 (whom he familiarly calls "R2") through repudiation of R2-D2's mission, through rebuke, through verbal and physical aggression, and through assigning blame. In all these expressions C-3PO is seen as a machine acting as a person. Yet some of these same behaviors project a mechanical quality that effects a double reversal of Bergson's premise: comedy derived from a machine acting like a person who acts like a machine.

R2-D2, whose memory banks contain secret military information vital to the Rebel Alliance, faithfully follows his programming to deliver heroine Princess Leia's emergency message to Obi-Wan Kenobi. "What mission?...I've *just* about had *enough* of you," C-3PO snubs the hurriedly bleeping R2-D2 when they are walking on the Tatooine desert. Later, C-3PO reiterates, "We'll have no more of this Obi-Wan Kenobi gibberish. And don't talk to me of your mission, either." His petulant rejection of both R2 and the mission limn C-3PO's very human selfishness, impatience, and spite.

C-3PO persistently and querulously upbraids his partner. Aboard the Princess' besieged starship, R2-D2 activates an escape pod in an attempt to protect himself as well as the secret plans from imminent capture by the Imperial Storm Troopers. In opposition to R2-D2's pragmatic action, C-3PO fussily rails that the escape pod is a restricted area. His rigid, and therefore ludicrous, obedience to regulations is a manifestation of what Bergson calls "professional automatism," which is the "constant attention to form and mechanical application of rules." C-3PO, who has identified himself as a Human Cyborg Relations programmed for protocol, seems obsessed with these rules and with enforcing them on R2-D2. "Be*have* yourself, R2," he scolds, when the droids first talk to Luke. A brief dialogue scene of the droids inserted into an action sequence -- the perilous flight of the heroes from Imperial Storm Troopers and spies at Mos Eisley -- ends with C-3PO's reprimand, "You watch your language!"

Little R2 also endures the frequent and overt insults of his taller counterpart, who calls him an "overweight blob of grease" as they argue about entering the escape pod, and a "nearsighted scrap pile" when they argue about which direction to walk in the desert. Even after convincing Luke to buy R2-D2 in lieu of another R2 unit with a defective "motivator," C-3PO haughtily reverts to affront: "Now don't you forget this. Why I should stick my neck out for you is quite beyond my capacity." In the dialogue insert seen during the chase at Mos Eisley spaceport, C-3PO flatly tells R2-D2 that he would "much rather have gone with Master Luke" than remained there with him. When R2-D2 fails to replay Princess Leia's entire holographic message, even after Luke complies with his request to remove the Jawas' restraining bolt, C-3PO remarks that he thinks Luke dislikes R2. The little droid emits an inquiring sound. C-3PO answers, "No," and gratuitously adds, "I don't like you either."

On two of these occasions, C-3PO supplements his vituperation with physical assault. The "nearsighted scrap pile" insult is accompanied by a kick. Later refusing to play back Leia's message for Luke, R2-D2 merely utters a sound. C-3PO exclaims, "What message?" as if repeating R2's pretense of ignorance, and then retorts, "The one you have been playing!" With this, he strikes R2-D2 emphatically atop his dome. Each time C-3PO kicks or hits R2-D2, the violence incurs no evident consequences. Only a palpably metallic sound is heard, reinforcing the impression that these characters are machines. At the same time, C-3PO's expressions of exasperation through spontaneous aggression are quintessentially human.

Contradictory behavior can be similarly found in C-3PO's habitual censure of R2. His assignment of blame, clearly undue, is illogical and therefore more typical of a human than a machine. Because it is so repetitive, however, behavior is also mechanical. Following the tensely dramatic escape of the *Millenium Falcon* from the Death Star and the destruction of the four pursuing TIE fighters, the heroes aboard the *Millenium Falcon* rejoice. It is a moment of community: even the formerly bitchy Princess Leia echoes Luke's "We did it!" as she exuberantly kisses Chewbacca in a two-shot. The film then cuts to a one-shot of C-3PO lying tangled in spluttering electric wires. "This is all *your* fault," he divisively accuses the innocent R2-D2.

C-3PO's ascription of blame becomes so iterative that the one time he blames himself for something, he has done so unjustly. This is comical for several reasons. First, he is a machine that responds emotionally, rather than instrumentally or logically. Second, this human behavior has become so repetitious, it is mechanical. Third, his sense of a need for blame at all in this situation arises from his mechanical misperceptions of a typically human response. Having effected a last-minute rescue of

Luke, Leia, Han, and Chewbacca from being crushed to death in the garbage masher, C-3PO misconstrues their spontaneous screams of jubilation transmitted over the hand communicator. "They're dying, R2!" C-3PO wails, and then blames himself. His inelasticity precludes any other than the literal interpretation of a scream. Finally, C-3PO's self-incrimination parallels his displacement of blame for his entanglement in the wires after the TIE fighters attack. Both acts punctuate the end of a suspenseful episode shown by rapid montage. For the audience, aroused by the diegesis (the story-line events) and its screen signifier (the formal treatment), the droid provides welcome relief.

The droids go their separate ways on the Tatooine desert because, we understand from C-3PO's part of the altercation, he had obstinately insisted that his way was "much easier." Soon experiencing more difficulty than anticipated, C-3PO blames his partner: "That malfunctioning little twirp!" This is all *his* fault." The humor of this situation arises from the already noted mechanical repetition in conjunction with what Bergson calls comic "inversion," which "renders comic any mishap that befalls one through one's own fault." Inversion, or "topsyturvydom," is one of the only "possible...methods of light comedy" because it is the antithesis of natural life's "irreversibility of the order of phenomenon," a characteristic by which Bergson distinguishes "the living from the merely mechanical."

Lucas creates comic inversion in *Star Wars* through his treatment of leadership dynamics in the droid dyad. "Don't let me catch you following me," C-3PO warns R2-D2 when they separate in the desert. This constitutes a role reversal because, in contrast his domination of R2 through scolding, blaming, insulting and hitting him, C-3PO has been following his counterpart, and is heard asking him for information and

reassurance. C-3PO's very first words, the opening dialogue of the film, questions R2-D2: "Did you hear that?" Moments later, as he follows R2-D2 through the invaded ship, he asks, "What are we going to do?" Inside the escape pod, into which he reluctantly follows R2-D2, he inquires, "Are you sure this thing's safe?" This motif of comic inversion is wryly stated by other dialogue in the film. When Han Solo complains about Obi-Wan Kenobi's leadership, the wise old man muses, "Who's the more foolish -- the fool or the fool who follows him?"

C-3PO as a Comic Personality

Even without his robotic foil, C-3PO himself is a comic character because he is an embodied dilemma of human versus mechanical. Twice in the film he announces that he has forgotten something: when he realizes he has inadvertently switched off his "comlink," a hand communicator with which he talks to Luke aboard the Death Star, and when he exclaims, "Oh, my! I'd forgotten how much I hate space travel!" during an emergency takeoff from the Mos Eisley spaceport. The latter functions as comic relief in the midst of a tense dramatic situation, as the *Millenium Falcon* narrowly eludes pursuing Imperial Storm Troopers. Its humor derives not only from the incongruity of timing but also from the incongruity of a machine acting like a person. Highly sophisticated artificial intelligence should discriminate between positive and negative stimuli and be capable of communicating the corresponding attraction or aversion, but it should be incapable of the very human frailty of forgetting.

C-3PO's misreading of the heroes' cheers heard after the garbage masher rescue, and his reaction of self-indictment, comprise a situation already cited for its instances and reversals of Bergsonian comedy. Lucas caps the humorous effect with the droid's accompanying, "Curse my metal body!" This imprecation is a paradox

because only a machine has a metal body, while only a human would find meaning in a curse. A curious blessing is also voiced by C-3PO: Is his rhapsodic "Thank the maker!" addressed to *homo faber* or to a deity? The benediction is doubly parodic because it is uttered as the robot immerses himself in an oil bath, thereby performing a simultaneous ablution and anointment.

"I ought to know better," C-3PO reflects at one point in the film. The humor here arises not only from his failure to know better, but from his characteristic talking to himself. Such behavior is not usually associated with a machine. It is, however, behavior which Bergson associates with a person who is acting mechanically. In particular, Bergson specifies this mechanical behavior to involve both repetition as well as obliviousness to one's own actions: a person "cannot be comical unless there be some aspect of his person of which he is unaware."

C-3PO's repeated, absentminded soliloquies are often hyperbolic, another comic quality Bergson equates with people acting like machines. "We'll be destroyed for sure!" and "This is madness!" aboard Princess Leia's stormed spacecraft, "Will this never end?" and "We're doomed!" aboard the Jawas' Sandcrawler, all exemplify C-3PO's inclination to sound like a comic Jeremiah.

But C-3PO does not exaggerate when he observes, "Nobody worries about upsetting a droid." This accurate assessment is as earnest as Han Solo's reply, "Cause a droid don't pull people's arms out of their sockets when they lose." These two lines, extracted from a dialogue in which R2-D2 is playing a holographic game with Chewbacca, are meaningful when correlated with an image seen twice in the film: a closeup shot of a severed arm. Like the verbal image of damage to the arm, the two visual images reinforce the impression that C-3PO is a machine.

One image is seen in the Mos Eisley cantina when an alien, a known felon, tries to provoke a fight with Luke. Obi-Wan Kenobi intercedes and the alien resorts to a "blaster" weapon. Instantly the former Jedi Knight draws his light sabre and strikes. The film cuts to a closeup of a severed arm, evidently the alien's, oozing blood on the floor. This is the most graphic consequence of violence depicted in the film, and is the only time that blood is seen. What may appear gratuitously violent (perhaps to earn the commercially desirable PG rating) has integrity, however, when compared to an analogous image occurring earlier in the film.

After Luke revives from his attack by the Sand People and meets Obi-Wan Kenobi, R2-D2 rotates his dome and emits an electronic sound. Luke immediately recalls C-3PO, who has been off-screen and forgotten during the introduction of Obi-Wan Kenobi. The audience is now reminded that C-3PO may also have been a victim of the Sand People's vicious assault. The film cuts to a closeup of C-3PO's severed arm lying on the ground. As the shot continues with a pan and tilt up to C-3PO, the music and R2-D2's noises sound plaintive.

While neither image evokes comedy, the distinction between the alien's loss of a limb and the droid's loss of a limb is signified by the respective presence and absence of blood. This contrast between the living and the mechanical is emphasized by the red color of the alien's blood, which signifies an existential bond between the exotic-looking alien and humanity. The ecumenicalism of life forms as opposed to the out-group of droids, verbally expressed by the cantina barkeep, is visually reaffirmed by this image. The dichotomy is further developed when Luke later re-attaches C-3PO's arm, and we are reminded that a droid, unlike a living creature, can be easily and painlessly repaired.

The dialectic within C-3PO between the mechanical and the living, and the resultant Bergsonian comedy, derive not from the loss of an arm, but from C-3PO's reaction to it, "I don't think I can make it," the droid says. "You go on, Master Luke. There's no sense risking yourself on my account, I'm done for." Luke asks, "What kind of talk is that?" His question, directed to C-3PO may well be asked by the film audience: what kind of talk *is* that?

The answer is complex. Some of the humor of C-3PO's dialogue comes from the audience's recognition of similar lines from other types of films, westerns and war films among them. Related to this is C-3PO's repeated gesture of extending his hand over his head when he is startled. On one of these occasions, inside the Jawas' Sandcrawler, he even adds, "Don't shoot!" The subtextual resonance of familiar genre dialogue and gestures cue us that the droid is acting like a melodramatic person. Yet beyond this impression is the realization that this melodramatic dialogue is stereotypical -- a term itself with roots in the mechanical aspect of printing. C-3PO's verbal response, then, while seemingly emotional and human, is really standardized and not spontaneous: in short, mechanical.

Conclusion

It is difficult to analyze what is funny. Perhaps the very act of analysis itself is so antithetical to the mental set of humor that it constitutes something mechanical encrusted on the spontaneity of the living, and so itself is comic.

Henri Bergson's concept of comedy, a person acting like a machine, is probably too narrow a definition. Nevertheless, George Lucas' *Star Wars*, C-3PO and R2-D2, demonstrate Bergsonian comic principles primarily through reversal -- a machine

acting like a person -- and sometimes through double reversal -- a machine acting like a person acting like a machine.